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ABSTRACT

This monograph is the third in a series of polls of the leadership of America's major public school systems. In addition to surveying board members, superintendents, and other leadership staff, this poll also included urban mayors and representatives of colleges and universities who work with staff and students of the member cities of the Council of the Great City Schools. Approximately 235 persons responded to the survey, which was administered at the annual conference of the Council of the Great City Schools. Responses are compared, as appropriate, to the surveys of 1993-94 and 1995-96. Fully 82.1% of respondents indicated that they were optimistic or somewhat optimistic about the future of urban education, but slightly more than 1 in 10 were somewhat or entirely pessimistic. When educators and urban leaders were asked to rate the overall help the school system received, no group or sector had an overwhelming majority of favorable responses, but many were acknowledged. However, less than one-sixth gave positive ratings to the print and electronic media and the U.S. Congress. As in previous surveys, parental involvement, adequate funding, and academic achievement remained the top most pressing needs. Nearly 9 of 10 respondents said that the strategies they used most for urban education reform were securing partnerships with business and community leaders and implementing staff development programs. Developing and implementing professional programs, designing and implementing higher performance standards, and designing and implementing higher content standards were the three most effective school reform strategies mentioned. The insights provided by this poll show that the categories of urban leaders sampled were fairly consistent in their responses, and that they are fairly optimistic about the prospects for urban education. (Contains seven figures, two tables, and two references.) (SLD)

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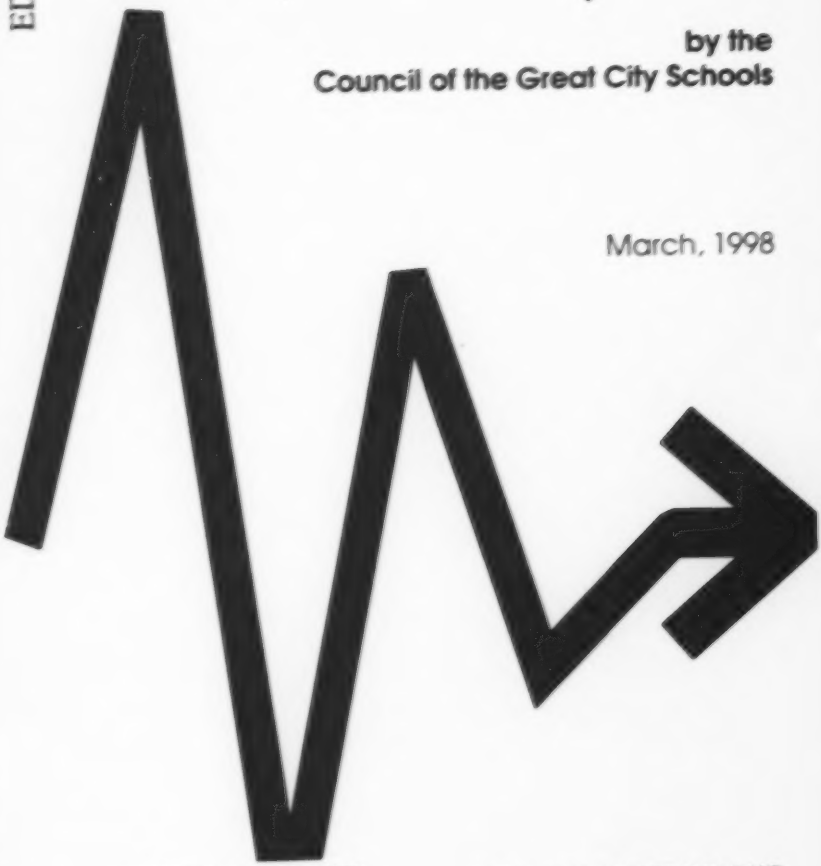
Critical Trends in Urban Education: A Poll of America's Great City Schools

by the
Council of the Great City Schools

March, 1998



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Critical Trends in Urban Education: A Poll of America's Great City Schools

March, 1998

Introduction

Public schools play a significant role in American life annually educating more than 45 million students. The challenges public schools face are significant and, in the case of many urban schools often staggering. President Clinton's 1998 State of the Union address highlighted the need for more qualified teachers, smaller class sizes, modern school buildings, high academic standards, after-school learning opportunities and technology enhancements. What do the people most closely involved with public schools say about the needs?

This brief monograph is the third in a series of polls of the leadership of America's major urban public school systems. In addition to surveying board members, superintendents and other leadership staff, this poll also included urban mayors and representatives of colleges and universities who work with staff and students of the Great City Schools. The survey was administered at the Council's 41st Annual Fall Conference: Building an Urban School Renaissance, October 15-18, 1997. All conference attendees were given the opportunity to complete the survey. The survey was also mailed to urban school leaders. Approximately 235 persons responded.

The first poll, published in 1994, asked a series of questions about the needs of urban schools and compared the results with national trends published by Phi Delta Kappa in 1993. The second poll did not make comparisons between urban schools and national averages, but did ask about both urban needs and urban solutions.

This 1997-98 poll provides trend data for the first time by comparing this year's repsonses with the 1995-96 poll data and, when appropriate, to the 1993-94 data.

Critical Trends '98 asked persons to respond to five items:

1. How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools?

2. Rate the overall help the school system receives from the following groups.

3. Identify what you believe to be the ten (10) most important or pressing needs of an urban school district.

4. Which of the following measures has your district pursued in its general reform process?

5. Rate the top three strategies for achieving the education goals for reform.

Hope for the Future

How do urban school leaders feel about the future? Do they feel that their hard work and perseverance have paid off? Are they hopeful?

To gauge their mood on these issues the survey asked: *How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools?* Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from "optimistic" (5) to "pessimistic" (1). Figure 1 displays the poll results.

- Fully 82.1% of all respondents indicated that they were either "optimistic" (33.6%) or "somewhat optimistic" (48.5%) about the future of urban education.

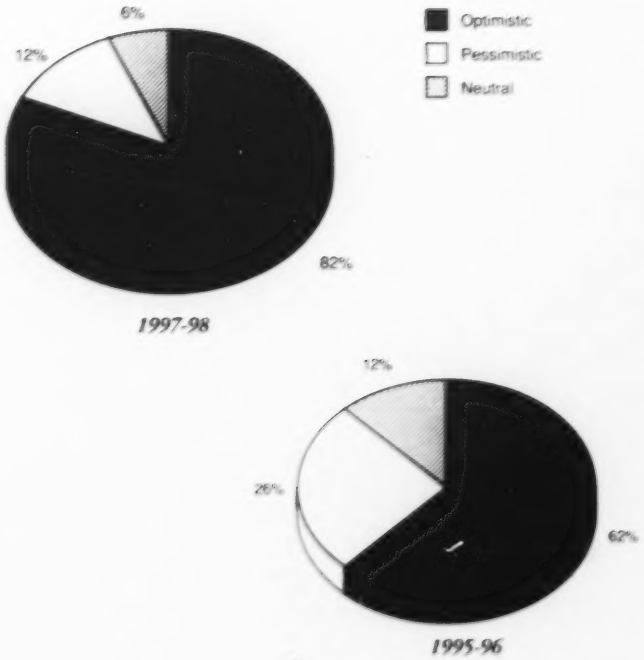
- Compared with the 1995-96 survey, one-third more urban leaders were "optimistic" or "somewhat optimistic" about the future of urban schools.

- Slightly more than one out of ten (12.2%) indicated that they were "somewhat pessimistic" (11.8) or entirely "pessimistic" (0.4).

- The percent of leaders who said they were either "somewhat pessimistic" or entirely "pessimistic" decreased 55% between 1995-96 and 1997-98.

- Only 5.7% said they were neutral about the future of urban education, compared with 12.4% in 1995-96.

Figure 1
Hope for the Future of Urban Schools
1995-96 and 1997-98



Helpfulness of Others

Urban public schools cannot succeed alone. The Council has developed *An Urban School Marshall Plan: A Framework for Improving America's Urban Public Schools* which details what leaders from urban schools, state governments, the federal government, and communities can do to improve urban public schools. Many of these groups are already engaged in activities to support urban schools. How do urban leaders perceive their helpfulness?

The survey asked urban leaders to: *Rate the overall help the school system receives from the following groups.* Respondents rated 17 groups, organizations and governmental agencies on a five-point scale ranging from "very helpful" (5) to "very unhelpful" (1). Figure 2 shows the percentage of persons who rated each group either "very helpful" or "helpful". Figure 3 displays rankings on the five point scale.

- No group or sector had an overwhelming majority of favorable responses. Foundations, local public education funds, and business leaders received the highest ratings (59.2%, 57.6%, and 57.5% respectively).

- Nearly one-half of the respondents gave community organizations (49.8%) and colleges and universities (47.7%) high grades for their helpfulness.

- Approximately four out of ten urban leaders gave mayors (41.1%) "helpful" or "very helpful" ratings.

- About one-third of the urban leaders gave positive grades to local advocacy groups (36.4%), the Clinton administration (34.0%), and state departments of education (29.4%).

- Approximately one-fourth of the leaders gave high ratings to religious organizations (25.2%), governors (24.9%), state legislators (24.6%), city council members (23.9%), and teacher unions (21.8%).

- Less than one-sixth of the respondents gave positive ratings to the print media, electronic media, and the U.S. Congress (13.5%, 11.9%, and 11.8% respectively).

The 1997-98 survey listed more groups than the 1995-96 survey, which makes direct comparisons difficult. Figure 3 shows ratings for each group for the years for which they are available.

Figure 2
Helpfulness of Groups to Urban Schools
1997-98

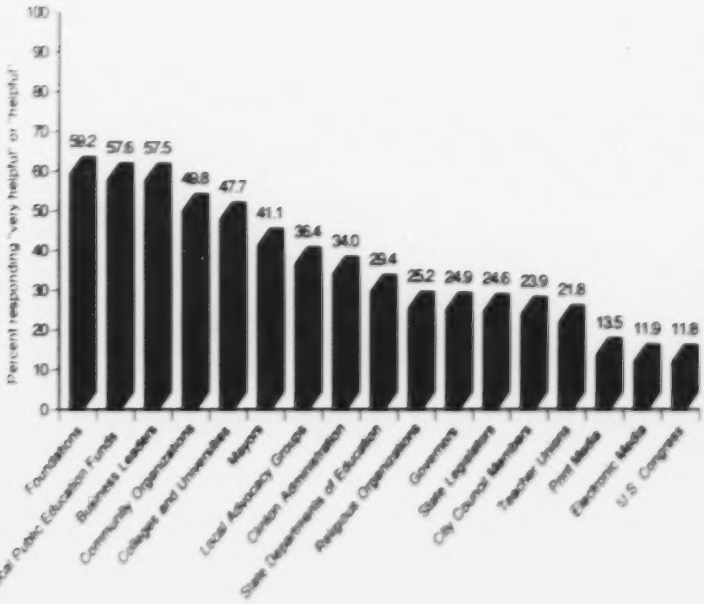


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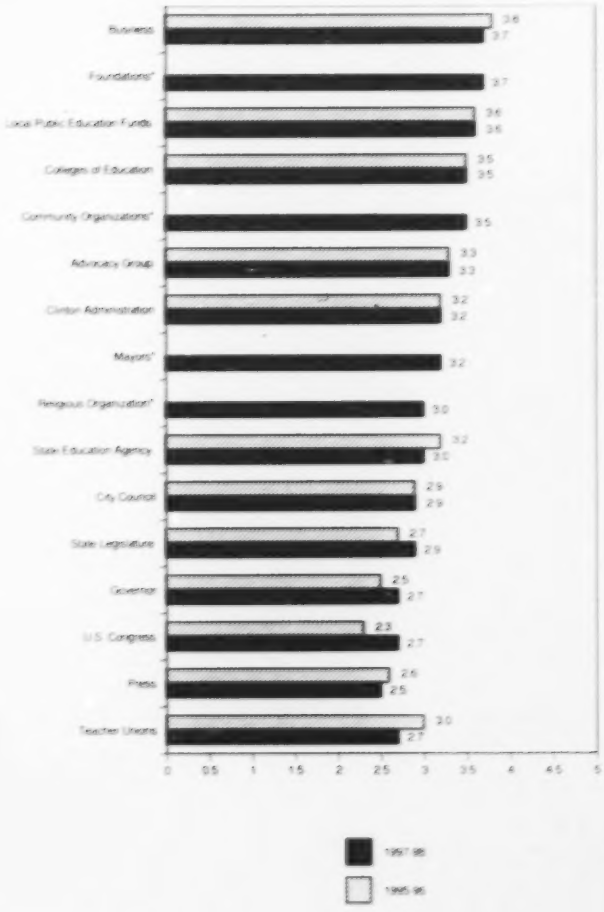
Figure 3

Comparison Between 1995-96 and 1997-98 on Helpfulness to Urban Schools



**Not included in 1995-96 survey*

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Most Pressing Needs

Urban leaders routinely face declining tax bases, infrastructures unfit for technology, and challenges educating students from diverse backgrounds. As urban public schools work hard to overcome these and other obstacles, what do they perceive as their greatest needs?

To answer this question, the survey asked urban school leaders to: *Identify what you believe to be the* ***ten (10)*** *most important or pressing needs of an urban school district.* The survey gave 41 items to be ranked, with extra space for needs not listed. Figure 4 and Table 1 show the results of this question.

- Parental involvement, adequate funding and academic achievement have remained the top most pressing needs for 3 consecutive polls.

- An overwhelming majority (76.7%) rated improving academic achievement as their most pressing need. This was also the number one need in the 1995-96 poll.

- Fully 60.6% of urban leaders rated both improving public confidence and improving public involvement among their top ten needs.

- Improving academic achievement (76.7%), building public confidence (60.6%), increasing parental involvement (60.6%), implementing professional development programs (56.8%), securing additional funding (48.3%), developing higher academic standards (43.6%), acquiring instructional technology (39.4%), and closing achievement gaps (37.3%) ranked among the top ten needs for both 1997-98 and 1995-96 school years.

- Urban leaders also included reducing class size (43.6%), renovating buildings (42.8%), recruiting teachers (37.3%), and improving racial attitudes (32.2%) among their top ten needs for 1997-98.

Figure 4

Needs of Urban Schools
1997-98

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Table 1

Top Ten Needs of Urban Schools 1993-94, 1995-96 and 1997-98

Need	1993-94	1995-96	1997-98
Violence and Gang Activity	1*	*	*
Parental Involvement	2	3	2
Bilingual Education	3	19	19
School Reform and Restructuring	4*	*	*
Site-based Management	5	17	*
Early Intervention/Early Childhood	6	8	13
Adequate Finance	7	2	4
Academic Achievement	8	1	1
HIV/AIDS	9	35	40
Equity Issues	10*	*	*
Public Confidence	*	4	2
Higher Academic Standards	*	5	5
Professional Development	*	6	3
Achievement Gaps	*	7	9
Drop Out Rates	*	8	12
Assessment Systems	*	9	13
Instructional Technology	*	10	8
Smaller Class Size	*	*	6
Building Renovations	*	12	7
Recruiting Teachers	*	14	9
Racial Attitudes	*	28	10

* *Not rated in given year or presented in a different manner.*

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Most Common Urban School Reform Strategies

Urban public schools are trying various reform strategies to improve academic performance, school climate, and serve their students better. What are the most common strategies?

The survey asked urban leaders: *Which of the following measures has your district pursued in its general reform process?* The survey presented 20 items and left space for respondents to list other reform strategies. Urban leaders were asked to rate all of the reform strategies that applied, with no restriction on number. Figures 5, 6 and 7 report use of school reform strategies for the 1993-94,1995-96 and 1997-98 school years.

- Nearly nine out of ten persons said the strategies they used most were securing partnerships with business and community leaders (86.1%) and implementing staff development programs (85.2%).

- At least 8 out of 10 (80.7%) of the respondents had set higher performance standards as a reform initiative.

- Fully three quarters (74.9%) of the urban leaders said they had decentralized their decision making and implemented higher content standards (74.4%).

- Nearly one-fourth of urban school leaders indicated that they had privatized or outsourced services (21.5%) and developed smaller schools as reform strategies (21.1%).

- Seven strategies made both the 1995-96 and 1997-98 top ten lists of most commonly used reform strategies: implementing professional development programs, decentralizing decision-making, developing higher content standards, acquiring on-line technology, downsizing central staff, developing new assessment systems, and recruiting a diverse teacher pool.

- Professional development was among the most frequently used reform strategies for 1993-94, 1995-96 and 1997-98.

Figure 5
Frequently Used Reform Strategies
of Urban School Leaders
1997-98

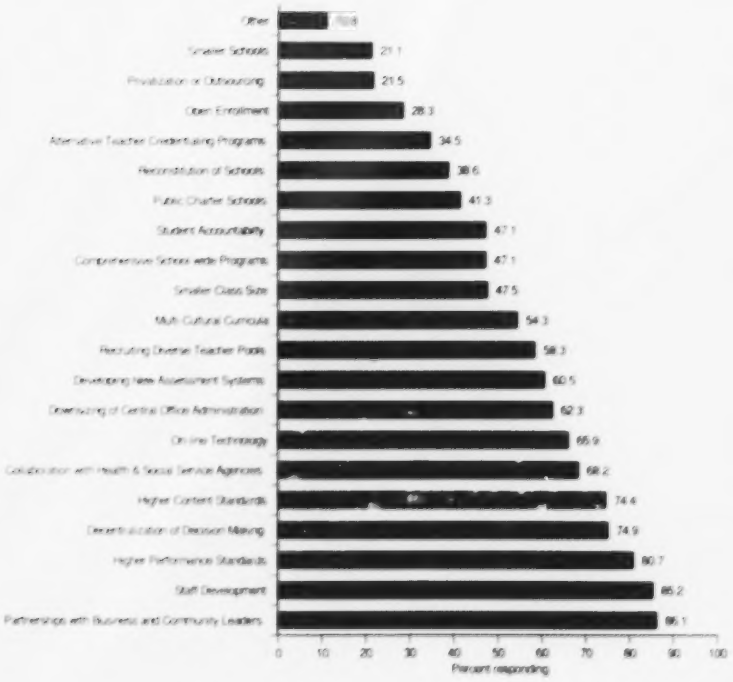
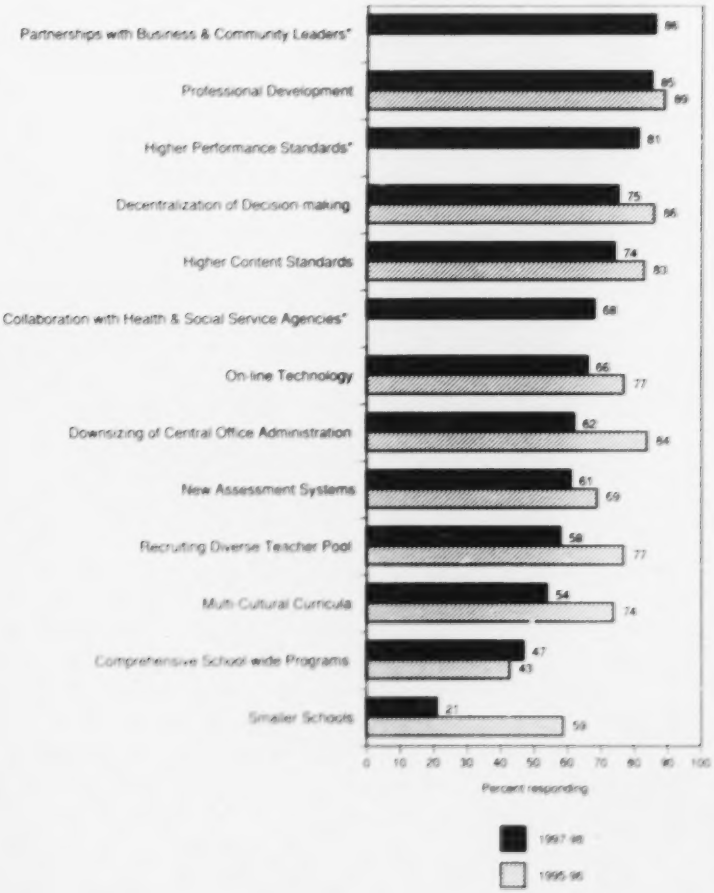


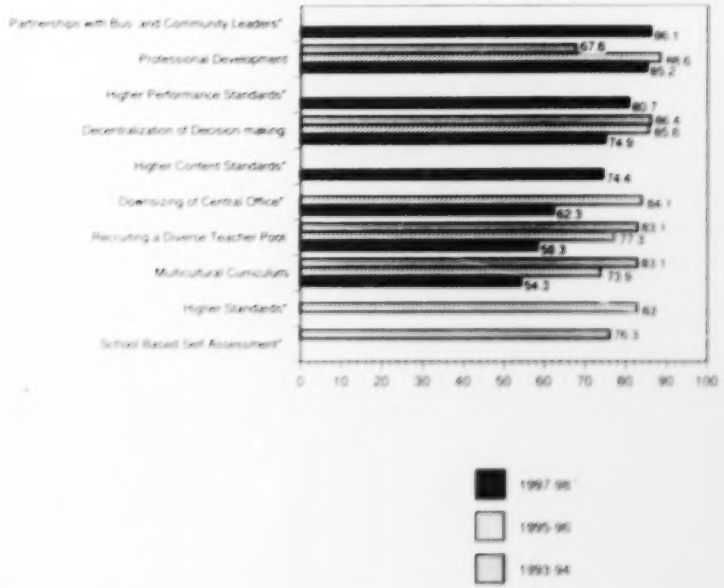
Figure 6

Comparison of Most Frequently Used Reform Strategies of Urban School Leaders 1995-96 and 1997-98



*Not in 1995-96 survey.

Figure 7
Comparison of Frequently Used Reform Strategies
1993-94, 1995-96 and 1997-98



**Not rated in given year or presented in a different manner*

Most Effective Urban School Reform Strategies

Some urban school reform strategies have been extremely successful, while others have not. Which strategies do urban leaders perceive as the most effective? To answer this question, the poll asked respondents to: *Rate the top three strategies that you perceive as the most effective in achieving the educational goals for reform.* Twenty-one strategies were presented with the option to identify others. Tables 2 and 3 display the results.

- Developing and implementing professional programs, designing and

Table 2
Most Effective Urban School Reform Strategies 1997-98

Staff Development	49.3
Higher Performance Standards	31.3
Higher Content Standards	24.7
Smaller Class Size	14.7
Student Accountability	12.7
Decentralization of Decision-making	11.3
Enhancing Partnerships with Business & Community Leaders	8.0
Comprehensive School-wide Programs	7.3
Developing New Assessments	6.7
Recruiting Diverse Teacher Pool	6.0

Table 3
Comparison of Most Effective Urban School Reform Strategies 1995-96 and 1997-98

	1995-96	1997-98
Higher Standards	1	*
Professional Development	2	1
Decentralized Decision-making	3	6
Higher Performance Standards	*	2
Higher Content Standards	*	3

**Not included in survey for that year. Single item on standards in 1995-96 survey was divided into multiples items in 1997-98.*

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implementing higher performance standards, and designing and implementing higher content standards were identified as the three most effective school reform strategies for 1997-98.

- Reducing class size, developing student accountability systems and decentralizing decision-making were cited as the fourth, fifth and sixth most effective reforms for 1997-98, although these ranked far behind the first three.

- Developing and implementing higher standards and professional development programs were cited among the top three reform strategies in both the 1995-96 and 1997-98 polls.

- Decentralizing decision-making fell from the number three strategy for the 1995-96 school year to number six for 1997-98.

Discussion

This poll provides an insight into how urban school leaders, members of urban colleges and universities, and mayors of cities who work with the Great City Schools feel about such critical issues as the future of urban public education, helpfulness of groups to urban schools, most pressing urban school needs, most common strategies for school reform, and the perceived effectiveness of those strategies. These different categories of urban leaders were fairly consistent in their responses.

1. Urban school leaders, mayors, and representatives of colleges and universities were all strongly optimistic about the nation's urban public schools, significantly more than in 1995-96. The survey did not ask the reasons for this sense of optimism, so, it is impossible to pinpoint why this change occurred.

The optimism may reflect a genuine confidence among urban leaders that big city school districts are making a comeback. There is evidence that a comeback is occurring: test scores are rising, districts are implementing strong accountability systems, and dropout rates are declining. The public has demonstrated their confidence in urban public schools by passing record high bond referendums.

2. Once again, business leaders rank among the most helpful groups to urban public schools. Foundation leaders and local public education funds also received high ratings from urban leaders. Teacher unions, print media, electronic media, and the U.S. Congress received the lowest ratings. Throughout the nation, these groups have become friendly – and sometimes not so friendly – critics of urban public schools.

These ratings confirm that public involvement is critical to the success of urban public schools. To understand better which types of involvement are most useful, future studies should identify the kinds of collaborative efforts these groups are making.

3. Improving academic achievement topped the list of most critical needs of urban school systems for a second straight year. Improving public confidence and public involvement came in a distant second. Other needs included designing and implementing professional development programs, securing additional funding, and developing higher academic standards. A noteworthy entry into this year's top ten list was improving racial attitudes.

For three consecutive polls improved achievement, parental involvement, and adequate school funding have remained in the top 10 most pressing needs.

4. Urban school leaders are undertaking a wide variety of strategies to turn their districts around, including many more than are listed in this survey.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents reported that their districts were securing partnerships with business and community leaders, implementing professional development programs, setting higher performance standards, decentralizing decision-making and implementing higher content standards as reform initiatives. Although politicians and other non-educators are beginning to view smaller class size as a promising reform strategy, educators and others who work closely with schools rated this fourth in effectiveness, well below the highest ranked strategy of implementing staff development programs. It is also worth noting that a fair number of urban districts are experimenting with smaller schools and privatization or outsourcing of services as reform strategies.

Collaborating with health/social service agencies, acquiring on-line

technology, and downsizing central office staff were listed among the most frequently used reform strategies, but not among the ten most effective.

5. Finally, respondents said that implementing professional development programs and implementing higher performance and content standards were their most effective reform strategies. It is interesting to note that although securing partnerships with business and community leaders was one of the most common reform strategies used, relatively few respondents felt it was one of their most effective.

Two new additions to this year's list of ten most effective strategies were developing new assessment systems and recruiting diverse teacher pool, although only 6 percent or so gave these strategies high ratings. Decentralizing decision-making was the fourth most frequently used strategy but the sixth most effective strategy. Reconstitution of schools, a fairly new reform strategy did not rank among the ten most effective strategies.

Reducing class size, implementing student accountability systems, and implementing comprehensive school-wide programs were listed among the ten most effective reform strategies, but not among the ten most used.

In conclusion, this survey shows that the people who work in or with urban public schools are optimistic about the future of urban public schools – a sign that others might have reason for more confidence, too.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

Council of the Great City Schools. *Critical Educational Trends: A Poll of America's Urban Schools.* Washington, DC: February, 1996.

Council of the Great City Schools. *Critical Educational Trends: A Poll of America's Urban Schools.* Washington, DC: March, 1994.

Technical Notes

Group	Number	Percent
School Board Member	49	20.9%
Superintendent	17	7.2%
Deputy/Assistant/Associate	55	23.4%
Other Educator	66	28.1%
College Representative	15	6.4%
Education Association Member	02	0.9%
Corporate Sponsor	02	0.9%
Mayor	13	5.5%
Other	16	6.8%
Total	235	100.1%

**Percentages do not total 100.0% due to rounding.*